

The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge Into Action

By Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton
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“Why knowledge of what needs to be done frequently fails to result in action or behavior consistent with that knowledge...we came to call this the knowing-doing problem—the challenge of turning knowledge about how to enhance organizational performance into actions consistent with that knowledge.”

Based on their research, Stanford professors Pfeffer and Sutton identified a significant and costly failure to apply what is learned. Managers know the right answers but somehow fail to put them into action.

They identified five major barriers that prevent the application of knowledge in the workplace, and offer eight guidelines for action to reduce the knowing-doing gaps.

Barriers that Create the Knowing-Doing Gap

1. When talk substitutes for action

Symptoms:

- No follow-up is done to ensure that what was said is actually done
- People forget that merely making a decision doesn't change anything
- Planning, meetings and report writing become defined as “action” that is valuable in its own right, even if it has no effect on what people actually do
- People believe that because they have said it and it is in the mission statement, it must be true and it must be happening in the firm
- People are evaluated on how smart they sound rather than on what they do
- Talking a lot is mistaken for doing a lot
- Complex language, ideas, processes, and structures are thought to be better than simple ones
- There is a belief that managers are people who talk, and others do
- Internal status comes from talking a lot, interrupting, and being critical of others' ideas

2. When memory is a substitute for thinking

Symptoms:

- The company has such a strong identity that anything new is viewed as being “inconsistent with who we are”
 - There are pressures to be consistent with past decisions, to avoid admitting mistakes and to show perseverance
 - People have strong needs for cognitive closure and avoiding any ambiguity
 - Decisions are made based on implicit, untested and inaccurate models of behavior and performance
 - People carry expectations from the past about what is and isn’t possible, and what can and can’t be done, into the future
3. When fear prevents acting on knowledge
Symptoms:
- Employees withhold suggestions for improvement out of fear
 - Employees express distrust of leadership
 - Employees avoid implementing new learning out of fear
4. When measurement obstructs good judgment
Symptoms:
- Measures are too complex
 - Measures are too subjective
 - Employees focus on individual measures rather than the big picture and overall purpose
 - Leaders emphasize achieving measures above good practices
5. When internal competition turns friends into enemies
Symptoms:
- People have incentives to avoid helping others or even to undermine their work
 - Leaders act as if performance comes from the sum of individual actions rather than interdependent behaviors like cooperation, knowledge sharing, and mutual assistance
 - Management acts as if people in the firm are competing in a “race” or “game” in which the competitors are within the firm and there are only a few winners and many losers
 - The way that work is managed distracts people from the task at hand because they feel they are under scrutiny, are constantly being compared to others, and are focused on what internal rivals in the company are doing
 - Comparative or relative, rather than absolute, evaluations are emphasized
 - Leaders are selected because they value competition and have a history of dominating peers in zero-sum contests
 - Little attention is paid to the power of expectations and the self-fulfilling prophecy, so people are labeled as “losers” or as being part of a bad unit and feel a lack of self-worth and resentment toward the firm

Which barriers are preventing application in your cabinet?

Eight Guidelines for Action

1. Why before how: philosophy is important – “Too many managers want to learn “how” in terms of detailed practices and behaviors and techniques, rather than “why” in terms of philosophy and general guidance for action.”
2. Knowing comes from doing and teaching others how – “Knowing by doing develops a deeper and more profound level of knowledge and virtually by definition eliminates the knowing-doing gap.”
3. Action counts more than elegant plans and concepts – “We have seen that this principle of acting even if you haven’t had the time to fully plan the action has two advantages. First, it creates opportunities for learning by doing. Without taking some action, without being in the actual setting and confronting the action ‘part,’ learning is more difficult and less efficient because it is not grounded in real experience. Second, the idea of ‘firing’ and then ‘aiming’ – or doing then planning—helps to establish a cultural tone that action is valued and that talk and analysis without action are unacceptable.”
4. There is no doing without mistakes. What is the company’s response? – “In building a culture of action, one of the most critical elements is what happens when things go wrong...What is the company’s response? Does it provide...’soft landings?’ Or does it treat failure and error so harshly that people are encouraged to engage in perpetual analysis, discussion, and meetings but not to do anything because they are afraid of failure?”
5. Fear fosters knowing-doing gaps, so drive out fear. – “Firms that are better able to turn knowledge into action drive out fear. They don’t go on missions to find who has erred, but rather attempt to build cultures in which even the concept of failure is not particularly relevant...Fear starts, or stops, at the top...Removing status markers and other symbols that reinforce the hierarchy can be useful and important.”

Driving out fear during hard times:

- *Prediction*: Give people as much information as possible about what will happen to them and when it will happen.
 - *Understanding*: Give people detailed information about why actions, especially actions that upset and harm them, were taken.
 - *Control*: Give people as much influence as possible over what happens, when things happen, and the way things happen to them; let them make as many decisions about their own fate as possible.
 - *Compassion*: Convey sympathy and concern for the disruption, emotional distress, and financial burdens that people face.
6. Beware of false analogies: fight the competition, not each other. – “Turning knowledge into action is easier in organizations that have driven fear and internal competition out of the culture. The idea that the stress of internal competition is necessary for high levels of performance confuses *motivation* with *competition*. It

is a perspective that mistakes internal competition and conflict, accompanied by a focus on ‘winning’ internal contests, for an interest in enhancing *organizational* performance and winning the battle in the marketplace.

7. Measure what matters and what can help turn knowledge into action – “A few measures that are directly related to the basic business model are better than a plethora of measures that produce a lack of focus and confusion about what is important and what is not.”
8. What leaders do, how they spend their time and how they allocate resources matters – “Leaders of companies that experience smaller gaps between what they know and what they do understand that their most important task is not necessarily to make strategic decisions or, for that matter, many decisions at all. Their task is to help build systems of practice that produce a more reliable transformation of knowledge into action...Leaders create environments, reinforce norms, and help set expectations through what they do, through their actions and not just their words.”

What actions can help close the knowing-doing gap in your cabinet?